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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2016  
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: AOUN DENIES HIZBALLAH FINANCIAL LINKS, PLEDGES  
OPPOSITION TO SINIORA GOVERNMENT

REF: A. ROBERTS-FELTMAN EMAIL SEPTEMBER 15  
[1](#)B. 2006.

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Ambassador Feltman and econoff met on 16 September with General Aoun and his son-in-law and chief advisor Gebran Bassil to deliver reftel demarche points. Aoun emphatically denied that the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) has taken money from Hizballah or "any other state." Feltman also reminded Aoun that the US takes seriously its legal obligation under 1701 to prevent the smuggling of weapons into Lebanon, and inquired about Aoun's recent trip to Belgium, the source of Aoun's enmity toward Prime Minister Siniora, and Aoun's strategy ahead of the next presidential election. (See septel for the Ambassador's one-on-one conversation with Aoun at the end of this meeting.) End Summary.

AOUN DENIES FINANCIAL LINKS  
TO HIZBALLAH  
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[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador Feltman and econoff met on 16 September with General Aoun and his son-in-law and chief advisor Gebran. The Ambassador opened his meeting by delivering demarche points and citing (without providing names) earlier examples of Lebanese politicians who had been seen donating money to a terror-linked charity and who then had to go through a waiver process for obtaining visas to the United States even for official visits. In response to reports that FPM took Hizballah funding and distributed it among Christian areas damaged during the conflict with Israel, Aoun emphatically denied that FPM took even "one cent" from Hizballah, although he suggested that FPM engineers had made an inventory of damages for Hizballah. Bassil interjected that Hizballah distributed reconstruction funds to a variety of southerners, not only Shia.

AOUN DENIES FPM SMUGGLING WEAPONS  
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[1](#)3. (S) The Ambassador reminded Aoun that the international community takes seriously the legal obligation under 1701 to prevent the smuggling of weapons into Lebanon. We are actively looking for signs that any group -- not just Hizballah -- is bringing in weapons directly or via intermediaries, for their own use or via intermediaries such as Hizballah. Aoun responded that the FPM remains a strictly political organization, and any weapons FPM has are for personal protection of Aoun himself, not for

military or paramilitary use. Bassil said he was encouraged by US efforts to monitor and weapons smuggling, and asked that the US reveal any evidence. Both men admitted they had heard rumors that other groups were smuggling weapons, but had no credible evidence to back those rumors.

#### OPPOSITION TO UNIFIL

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¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked why Aoun had made such strong public statements rejecting UNIFIL deployment along the Syrian border. Surely as a former military commander, Aoun must recognize that the LAF is not in any condition to patrol these border effectively on its own. Aoun explained that his opposition to UNIFIL stems from his expectation that Syria will seal its borders in response to a UNIFIL border deployment, cutting off Lebanon's trade access. Lebanon cannot afford that, he argued.

#### AOUN IN BELGIUM

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¶5. (C) Recently returned from Belgium, Aoun explained that in addition to checking on his personal investments, he had met with Belgian and UN officials on Lebanon, and with Javier Solana on Iran. (See septel for Aoun's comments on his Belgian trip to the Ambassador when the two met one-on-one at the conclusion of this meeting. Aoun acknowledged that he had hoped to mediate an exchange of the captive Israeli soldiers for Lebanese held in Israel.)

#### MORE STRIDENT HIZBALLAH RHETORIC NOT AOUN'S INFLUENCE

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¶6. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's question about why Hizballah statements were sounding closer to Aoun's statements, Aoun suggested that Nasrallah's shift from conciliatory speeches directly following the conflict to more strident, anti-government rhetoric in the last week was not due to Aoun's influence. He distinguished his own position from Nasrallah's, defending his calls for the formation of a new, "national unity" government better able assume responsibility and inspire confidence and stability. He accused Hizballah of trying to split the government and cause doubt, without really planning for greater participation in a new government.

#### ANTI-SINIORA RHETORIC HEARTFELT, NOT POSTURING

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¶7. (S) The Ambassador asked Aoun whether his personal views of PM Siniora mirrored the strident public criticism Aoun gives about Siniora. Aoun clarified that his personal view of Siniora is just as dim as his public statements. He accused Siniora of inability to follow through on any of his pledges before his promised deadlines. Aoun cited as examples of Siniora's failures the reversal of constitutional council, the failure of a special committee to liberate detainees from Syria, lack of progress on an electoral law and the economic plan, and failure to provide funding for post-war reconstruction.

#### PLANS AHEAD: ANTI-SINIORA RHETORIC, BUT NO STREET ACTION

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¶8. (C) Aoun appeared skeptical of Ambassador Feltman's point that Siniora's increased international credibility following his role during the conflict between Hizballah and Israel was important to rebuilding international and investor confidence in Lebanon. Aoun did not see evidence

of the benefit to Lebanon from Siniora's stronger relationship with international partners. He indicated that his strong anti-Siniora rhetoric would continue. He claimed that he is not planning any demonstrations, although he indicated that other groups may be planning street action. Aoun described his strategy ahead of the presidential election due before November 2007 as continuing rhetorical opposition to the government.

AOUN NOT OPPOSED  
TO A POST-UNIIIC TRIBUNAL  
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¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun for his views about the proposed special tribunal with international character that would be created to try any suspects in the murder of Rafiq Hariri. Aoun acknowledged that issue as being one of the reasons cited by the March 14 movement in refusing to create a national unity cabinet. But, he said, he does not oppose the creation of a post-UNIIIC tribunal. Nor would he halt the creation of a tribunal if he was brought into the government, he insisted. In fact, he claimed to be "the first person" who called for an international tribunal.

NO SHIA SPLIT  
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¶10. (C) Aoun was skeptical that the fact that ministers allied with Speaker Nabih Berri's voted with the Cabinet recently against Hizballah's ministers were signs of a split in the Shia community, commenting "the Shia split in peace but not in war."

COMMENT  
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¶11. (S) No doubt tipped off by his U.S. supporters who already had heard the U.S. concerns about FPM-Hizballah financial cooperation, Aoun was prepared for our demarche. He calmly but firmly denied that the FPM had distributed Hizballah funds (extensive media quotes by FPM activists notwithstanding). We believe that Aoun has learned the seriousness of the U.S. concerns and will be more careful in the future, although we need to continue to monitor this. He still does not seem to grasp the broader issue,

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though, that Hizballah's arms and aims are the antithesis of the strong state that Aoun purports to want to build. Whatever Siniora's faults and his political differences with Aoun, Siniora does not threaten Lebanon's future in the same way that Aoun's Hizballah allies do. But, unfortunately, Aoun still sees Siniora as the bigger problem, the solution of which justifies his Hizballah links.

FELTMAN